

**Written:** First half of 1847

**Source:** *The Poverty of Philosophy*, by Karl Marx, Progress Publishers, 1955;

**First Published:** in Paris and Brussels, 1847

**Translated:** from the French by the Institute of Marxism Leninism, 1955;

**Online Version:** mea 1993; Marx/Engels Internet Archive (marxists.org) 1999;

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## The last pages of “The Poverty of Philosophy”

By Karl Marx, 1847

*Sometimes considered to be the first concise full statement of Marxism*

Economists and Socialists [*The socialists of that time: the Fourierists in France, the Owenites in England – note to the German edition, 1885, by Frederick Engels*] are in agreement on one point: the condemnation of *combination*. Only they have different motives for their act of condemnation.

The economists say to workers:

*Do not combine. By combination you hinder the regular progress of industry, you prevent manufacturers from carrying out their orders, you disturb trade and you precipitate the invasion of machines which, by rendering your labor in part useless, force you to accept a still lower wage. Besides, whatever you do, your wages will always be determined by the relation of hands demanded to hands supplied, and it is an effort as ridiculous as it is dangerous for you to revolt against the eternal laws of political economy.*

The Socialists say to the workers:

*Do not combine, because what will you gain by it anyway? A rise in wages? The economists will prove to you quite clearly that the few ha'pence you may gain by it for a few moments if you succeed will be followed by a permanent fall. Skilled calculators will prove to you that it would take you years merely to recover, through the increase in your*

*wages, the expenses incurred for the organization and upkeep of the combinations.*

And we, as Socialists, tell you that, apart from the money question, you will continue nonetheless to be workers, and the masters will still continue to be the masters, just as before. So no combination! No politics! For is not entering into combination engaging in politics?

The economists want the workers to remain in society as it is constituted and as it has been signed and sealed by them in their manuals.

The Socialists want the workers to leave the old society alone, the better to be able to enter the new society which they have prepared for them with so much foresight.

In spite of both of them, in spite of manuals and utopias, combination has not yet ceased for an instant to go forward and grow with the development and growth of modern industry. It has now reached such a stage, that the degree to which combination has developed in any country clearly marks the rank it occupies in the hierarchy of the world market. England, whose industry has attained the highest degree of development, has the biggest and best organized combinations.

In England, they have not stopped at partial combinations which have no other objective than a passing strike, and which disappear with it. Permanent combinations have been formed, *trades unions*, which serve as ramparts for the workers in their struggles with the employers. And at the present time all these local *trades unions* find a rallying point in the National Association of United Trades, the central committee of which is in London, and which already numbers 80,000 members. The organization of these strikes, combinations, and *trades unions* went on simultaneously with the political struggles of the workers, who now constitute a large political party, under the name of *Chartists*.

The first attempt of workers to associate among themselves always takes place in the form of combinations.

Large-scale industry concentrates in one place a crowd of people unknown to one another. Competition divides their interests. But the maintenance of wages, this common interest which they have against their boss, unites them in a common thought of resistance — *combination*. Thus combination always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the capitalist. If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists in their turn unite for the purpose of repression, and in the

face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages. This is so true that English economists are amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favor of associations, which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favor of wages. In this struggle — a veritable civil war — all the elements necessary for a coming battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point, association takes on a political character.

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into worker. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends becomes class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle.

In the bourgeoisie we have two phases to distinguish: that in which it constituted itself as a class under the regime of feudalism and absolute monarchy, and that in which, already constituted as a class, it overthrew feudalism and monarchy to make society into a bourgeois society. The first of these phases was the longer and necessitated the greater efforts. This too began by partial combinations against the feudal lords.

Much research has been carried out to trace the different historical phases that the bourgeoisie has passed through, from the commune up to its constitution as a class.

But when it is a question of making a precise study of strikes, combinations and other forms in which the proletarians carry out before our eyes their organization as a class, some are seized with real fear and others display a *transcendental* disdain.

An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society. For the oppressed class to be able to emancipate itself, it is necessary that the productive powers already acquired and the existing social relations should no longer be capable of existing side by side. Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself. The organization of revolutionary elements as a class supposes the existence of all the productive forces which could be engendered in the bosom of the old society.

Does this mean that after the fall of the old society there will be a new class domination culminating in a new political power? No.

The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of every class, just as the condition for the liberation of the third estate, of the bourgeois order, was the abolition of all estates and all orders. [*Estates here in the historical sense of the estates of feudalism, estates with definite and limited privileges. The revolution of the bourgeoisie abolished the estates and their privileges. Bourgeois society knows only classes. It was, therefore, absolutely in contradiction with history to describe the proletariat as the "fourth estate" - note to the German edition, 1885, by Frederick Engels*] .

The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.

Meanwhile the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is a struggle of class against class, a struggle which carried to its highest expression is a total revolution. Indeed, is it at all surprising that a society founded on the *opposition* of classes should culminate in brutal *contradiction*, the shock of body against body, as its final denouement?

Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.

It is only in an order of things in which there are no more classes and class antagonisms that *social evolutions* will cease to be *political revolutions*. Till then, on the eve of every general reshuffling of society, the last word of social science will always be:

***"Le combat ou la mort; la lutte sanguinaire ou le néant. C'est ainsi que la question est invinciblement posée."***

George Sand

[From the novel *Jean Siska*: "Combat or Death: bloody struggle or extinction. It is thus that the question is inexorably put."]

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From: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/index.htm>

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